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ABSTRACT

Local school councils (LSCs) constitute another type of involvement in the education arena. These councils' functions vary from providing advice to making comprehensive and controversial educational decisions that affect students and staff. This booklet provides background information on LSCs, points out their benefits and drawbacks, and raises key concerns. Critics caution that councils pose the following problems: (1) Educators are caught between the school board and the councils; (2) councils have the potential to abuse power in a way that disables competent principals; and (3) inexperienced and uninformed members may make unsound decisions. Other concerns to be addressed include accountability, roles and relationships, need for uniform policy, principal responsibility, maintenance of educators' professionalism, training, communication, decision making, and collective bargaining. Five steps for getting started are outlined--planning, assessment, goal setting, structural development, and evaluation. Following sections provide answers to most frequently asked questions about LSCs and describe various types of LSCs in Chicago, Kentucky, and West Virginia. In conclusion, the structure of LSCs and how they fit into the governance system are key factors in determining their impact on education. (LMI)

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LOCAL SCHOOL COUNCILS

Where We Stand

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AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

Local School Councils... *Where We Stand* is a position statement adopted by the Executive Committee of the American Association of School Administrators. It is intended to provide background information, point out benefits and cautions, and ultimately stir discussion of this important issue, which has profound implications for education.

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Getting People Involved

Greater community involvement ... empowerment ... responsiveness. These words and the ideas they represent are having a profound effect on all public institutions, including schools.

Through personal contact, surveys, advisory councils, parent groups, shared decision making, school-based management, and many other means, schools have diligently worked to keep their key publics engaged.

Now another type of involvement has entered the education arena—local school councils, which sometimes have other names, such as school site councils, management councils, and accountability committees. Whatever they're called, these councils, sometimes appointed and sometimes elected, serve at the local school level. Their functions vary from providing advice to making far-reaching and delicate educational decisions affecting students and staff.

Whether local school councils are appropriate largely depends on the way they are structured. If they are organized to provide advice on policy and to counsel those charged with ultimate responsibility for the governance and administration of local schools, then their contributions can be valuable. If, on the other hand, they are organized in a way that leads to time-consuming conflict, power struggles, and continual ambiguity about who is responsible for what, they will become a distraction. When that happens, the councils can lead to frustration, a lack of focus and accountability, and ultimately, the loss of talented professional educators.



What the Critics Are Saying

Critics of councils that possess far-reaching decision-making powers have deep concerns, such as:

- Superintendents, principals, and teachers are caught between the policymaking school board and the operational council, which might violate policy, create equity problems, and create systemwide chaos.

Because councils can sometimes hire and fire principals, they can be tempted to exercise power in a way that intimidates and disables competent, experienced, and extensively prepared educators.

The councils or some council members, without having spent years studying child development or effective instruction, can impose poorly grounded decisions on the schools and actually undermine rather than improve education for students in the classroom.

What Should Councils Avoid?

Many educators agree on what local school councils should avoid. For example, they should not:

- Make decisions that violate school board policy;
- Try to take on the role of principal, superintendent, or school board, each of whom must maintain unique and specific legal responsibility for the school system; nor
- Venture beyond the limits of their expertise or their assignments.



Council Concerns To Be Addressed

When local school councils become key players in school decisions, they must perform responsibly. That means, before establishing any such council, clear rules of authority and accountability should be established. It might be prudent to create a special committee with that specific responsibility, and provide training for members of the committee. School board members and administrators recommend that the following concerns be addressed:

Accountability. Who ultimately will be responsible for the school district? Even though many people may believe they are "in charge," who will be accountable for decisions and for their impact on students' education? How is it possible to hold a voluntary committee accountable? Some fear that when everyone is in charge, no one is in charge.

Roles and Relationships. The roles of the councils and their relationships to board members, superintendents, principals, teachers, and others in the school district need to be clarified to avoid misunderstandings, unresolvable conflicts, or abuses of power. How a local school council fits into the fabric of the school system should be clearly defined.

The Need for Uniform Policy. Ultimately, policies that govern the schools must come from the school board. Only school boards have the authority to adopt formal districtwide policy. If councils at individual schools move into a policymaking role, districtwide progress toward reform and improved student performance might be brought to a halt. Local school councils should operate within the policies of the district, yet have a full understanding of the process for recommending policy changes.



If a council's recommendation runs counter to more appropriate policy or sound educational practice, the recommendation should not be accepted. Whenever possible, however, before certain policies are adopted, school boards should actively seek local school council reaction.

Responsibility of Principals. Operating within the policies and procedures of the school district and with the advice and counsel of parents and the community, principals should be the managers and educational leaders of their schools. Parents and school staff ultimately will need and want to know who is in charge at their local school and how decisions are made that affect their children. To what extent will the principal be beholden to the local school council? Will the principal have to become more politician than educator? With too many masters, will the principal be able to solve problems creatively and take risks on behalf of children and the community?

Maintaining the Professionalism of Educators. Teachers and administrators should be respected for their professional knowledge and experience. They can certainly benefit from ideas and advice, but they need to be able to put their professional judgment to work on a day-by-day, hour-by-hour basis to ensure a good education for each and every student.

Training. Local school councils, if they are to operate effectively, will need appropriate training. At best, council members will be part of a joint training effort that also involves the superintendent, representative board members, principals, teachers, and perhaps others. Local school council members will need both information and skills. Their training might include: fundamental concepts of representative government; the rules of parliamentary procedure; the means of reaching consensus;



techniques for effective communication; the benefits of collaboration; and an understanding of the key roles played by the school board, superintendent, central office administrators, principals, and teachers.

Communication. The key to mutual understanding and to making the best possible use of council advice is open communication. Two-way open communication is the first step in building trust and clearly articulating the expectations for educators and the local school councils. How will educators and the council communicate with each other? How will they, together, communicate certain messages to the community? These are key questions that should be answered as quickly as possible.

Decision Making. Who's in charge? If a group similar to a school board is established at each school, then each school might be seen as a separate district. Do local school councils have the right to make certain decisions, and will they have the resources to implement them? How many additional people will our schools need to account for the use of public funds and for educational results?

Those charged with various decisions must be able to make them within policies and budgets established by school boards and the state. Local school councils should operate within reasonable guidelines that clarify how the councils contribute to the decision-making process. A watershed question is whether local school councils are decision-making bodies or whether they are advisory.

Collective Bargaining. What safeguards are in place to ensure that representation on councils from the teaching and support staff is independent from union control? This precaution can



obviate serious political repercussions as the council, administration, and school board work together for the benefit of the individual school.

Other concerns. Additional questions surrounding local school councils include: How will school governance ultimately be defined? How will decisions be made? Will individual schools, including charter schools, be able to create their own boards and develop their own policies? Can the best interests of all students in a community be met when dozens or hundreds of competing councils or boards vie for scarce resources?

Five Steps in Effective Local School Council Operation

To serve local school needs most effectively, a council must be systematic in its approach to assignments. Here are five basic steps for getting organized:

- 1. Planning.** The council, working in collaboration with the school principal and staff, should determine the issues it will address or the problems or needs it will tackle on behalf of the school. Plans and activities should be consistent with the overall mission of the school district.
- 2. Assessment.** Working with the school principal and staff, the council should gather information that will contribute to the appropriate handling of its assignment. Informed judgment is essential. Depending on the issue at hand, useful information might include: a demographic profile of the school, dropout rates, test scores, results of school climate surveys, attitudes of parents and other citizens, and how the community gets its information about the school. Members of councils might be especially interested in learning whether and how their work is contributing to a better education for students in the classroom.



- 3. Goal Setting.** Working with the principal, the council should establish clear goals and objectives about what it hopes to achieve by taking on certain projects or addressing specific issues.
- 4. Strategy Development.** Once the objectives are in place, the council, still working in tandem with school staff, should develop an action plan. What specifically will the council do to reach its objectives on behalf of the school?
- 5. Evaluation.** As it moves forward with a project, the council should informally discuss how well things are going. Regular evaluations should be sought from the school principal. When a project is completed, the council should determine how well it did in reaching its stated objectives. Was the effort a great success? Did the effort contribute to better education for students? Did the council take on more than it could handle? What should the council do differently next time? Of course, the results of formal and informal evaluations should be considered in developing future plans, objectives, and strategies.

Key Questions

Here are some of the most frequently asked questions about local school councils:

Who should be a member of the council?

Membership may vary from one community to another, unless it is made uniform by state law. Where it is not prescribed, members might include: the school principal, representative teachers, other administrators, parents, nonparent taxpayers, representatives of community-based organizations that serve students in the school, and students themselves.



How large should a council be?

There is no standard size. Generally, any group of this type should be large enough to include a cross-section of staff and community members, but small enough to operate and communicate effectively.

How often should meetings be held?

Meetings should be held when there is work to do or business to conduct. Meetings for meetings' sake can lead to disillusionment among council members. However, a minimum number of meetings should be established. A policy might state, "When needed, but at least four times a year and no more frequently than once a month during the school year."

Who should determine the role of the councils?

The role of the councils will be determined largely by school board policy and administrative procedures, unless a specific role is mandated by law. Nonetheless, principals and perhaps other district leaders should meet with council members early on to draw up guidelines for effective and acceptable operation. In some cases, a council might be asked to make a decision, in other cases to provide advice, and in still others to take on a project. Ultimately, the council should serve the school. The school should not serve the council.

What if special expertise is needed to deal with a certain issue?

A person or group of people with special knowledge of the issue might be invited to join in council discussions. Another approach is to establish an "open chair," a nonvoting position temporarily filled by different individuals, based on issues the council will be considering.



Who should lead council meetings?

The council chair or school principal should lead council meetings.

How do local school councils relate to PTAs and other parent groups?

This relationship is sensitive because parent organizations have made substantial contributions to the schools for decades.

Parent organization representatives, such as PTA officers, should be consulted in developing the structure of the council and in appointing representatives. The council may wish to provide regular reports at parent organization meetings.

How should the councils relate to each other and to the school district governance structure?

A districtwide facilitating or accountability committee might be established to monitor the operation of local school councils, consider waivers of existing policies or procedures, explain any districtwide concerns, and report to the school administration and board. Members of that committee could include the president of the school board, the superintendent, teacher organization and parent group representatives, building principals from both the elementary and secondary levels, as well as additional teachers and parents.

What attitudes must educators and board members have about council advice?

Administrators, teachers, and board members should be open to advice from local school councils. Defensiveness should be replaced by attentive listening, thoughtful consideration, and professional expertise. At each meeting, a report should be made on what advice educators and board members used; what advice



might be reconsidered when funding, staff, or other resources become available; and what advice will not be used because, in its present form, it is not educationally sound.

Variations in Existing Local School Councils

Currently, local school councils exist in a few communities, and some states have either mandated or made it possible to establish councils. California, for example, now has elementary school site councils as a result of reform efforts during the early 1980s and more recently established charter schools. Colorado's 1988 school finance act required each school to have an accountability committee, which is largely advisory. District councils, also largely advisory, have existed since 1971 throughout the state.

Some additional examples of various types of local school councils are described below.

Chicago

In 1988, the Illinois General Assembly passed a reform law that established local school councils in Chicago's 540 schools. The councils, composed of parents, teachers, school administrators, and others in the community, are elected each year.

Chicago's local school councils are empowered by law to develop school improvement plans, devise and adopt the local school budget, and hire and fire building principals.

Kentucky

Local school councils were mandated by the state legislature as part of a comprehensive Kentucky Education Reform Act in 1990. The councils are elected annually, and consist of two parents, three teachers, and a principal/administrator.



In Kentucky, the councils are responsible for setting school policies that will enhance student achievement and accountability. The principal remains the instructional leader of the school and administers policies established by the council and the local school board. Local school councils determine personnel budgets after the school board notifies council members of their school's available funds.

Unlike in Chicago, the Kentucky local school councils cannot recommend transfers or dismissals, although they have a voice in personnel decisions. School principals are selected by the councils based on recommendations from the superintendent.

Kentucky councils also decide on instructional materials, practices, and student support services, in collaboration with the local school board. Councils play a role in scheduling, curricular, technology, and evaluation decisions — again, within school board policy guidelines. Some local school leaders, however, have expressed concern about councils that try to micromanage or divert attention from real education concerns.

West Virginia

A 1990 school reform package in West Virginia called for establishment of local school councils. The councils are composed of three teachers elected by the faculty senate of the school; two school service personnel chosen by their colleagues; three parents of students enrolled in the school elected by the parent/teacher organization; two at-large members appointed by the principal to represent local citizens, businesses, and industries; and a student, if the school serves students in grades seven or higher.



In West Virginia, the councils are required to meet at least once each grading period and to focus on improving teaching and learning. Under the law, the local school councils encourage parental involvement, solicit advice and suggestions from businesses, promote volunteer and mentor programs, and encourage the use of school facilities for community activities.

The councils may propose alternatives to school objectives, evaluation procedures, and financial arrangements that save money or that meet or exceed current educational standards.

The local school councils decide issues that directly affect schools and have the power to propose waivers of state policy that could boost student achievement. However, the state makes it clear that the councils are not intended to imitate or replace parent/teacher organizations.

Local School Councils...To Be or Not To Be

AASA has a longstanding commitment to effective parent and community involvement in public schools. Local school councils are one additional way to encourage participation and involvement.

Whether local school councils improve education and how they do this are legitimate topics for discussion and debate. The structure of local school councils and how they fit into the governance system are key factors in determining if they will enhance education or cause a serious distraction from the primary task of our schools — ensuring student learning.

AASA hopes this brief publication will serve as a basis for informed discussion and policymaking on local school councils in schools and school systems across the country.



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